

PACIFIC REGION: FOOD SECURITY **BY GEORGE KIRIAU**

Introduction

This paper presents a brief outline on the situation of Pacific island countries in regards food security. It is prepared to stimulate discussion as to whether it is an issue that the Anglican Alliance might wish to follow up on especially in the Pacific region.

Food security is defined in this paper as access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle.

The main threats in the Pacific island region are unstable food prices, fuel price upheavals and the effects of climate change and natural disasters such as effects of cyclones, flooding, king tide waves and sea level rise. In some places, high population growth and migration to urban centres and lack of jobs have resulted in a growing urban poor who are particularly vulnerable.

While there has been no report of deaths due to starvation in the Pacific region, it appears the present situation with respect to food security is the health & wellbeing of the populations of the Pacific region have been affected with matters likely to worsen unless remedial action is taken by Governments of the region with all stakeholders.

Discussion

- Food Supply and Security

The Pacific island countries import a lot of food from developed countries abroad. Most noticeably are their import of cereals like rice and flour. Cereals are now becoming important sources of starch and energy replacing root crops.¹ In Solomon Islands, about a third of its foreign reserves spending are on rice alone. In the smaller countries, food imports have exceeded totally their export earnings.

¹ Information accessed from a report produced by FAO/WHO/UNICEF/WHO/PIFS 'A Pacific Food Summit 2010; Facilitating Action for a Food Secure Pacific' 12 May 2009, p.1 and accessed from www.foodsecurepacific.org on 17th August 2011.

Any changes in the import food prices in the global economy can have adverse ramifications on food security. In 2007/8, increases in cereal prices on the global economy brought about a lot of hardships on families especially those in the urban areas.

The Pacific islands also are a net importer of fuel. This has meant when the price of oil goes up, this high price feeds into the local economy. Not only are the price of imported goods affected but also local food production affected the latter especially as a result of high transport costs.

The combined impact of these two factors has markedly increased the vulnerability of the island countries to the global economy.

Natural disasters such as cyclones & storms and king tide waves, sea erosion & sea level rise also have important ramifications on food security. In the low lying islands the impact on food security could be pronounced with the survival of the communities at stake with intrusion of sea onto the land. Communities living in low lying areas along the coast and places inland along rivers and mountainous areas are susceptible to the vagaries of the climate. These areas are susceptible to flooding and landslides which may wash away their food crops. We have had instances where access to food has been affected because of droughts. It is acknowledged that the development partners have provided disaster relief especially in relation to disasters.

The Anglican Church in Solomon Islands has been working on a food security project on one atoll, the Lord Howe Islands, in conjunction with Episcopal Relief and Development. This project came about following the destruction of their staple, swamp taro by king tide waves. The islands are vulnerable because they are low lying but also remote. Until recently, the islanders have traded beche de mer which have provided a source of income to buy food from Honiara but because of a ban on the harvesting of the commodity, the community has been affected. The project the Church is running in conjunction with ERD is currently testing salt-resistant crops that will mitigate the effects of sea sprays and salt water intrusion from king tide waves on land.

Traditionally Pacific societies have thrived on subsistence agriculture and fisheries but this has been affected by disputes, intensified cash cropping, destruction of natural resources because of extraction industries and the growth of the population. In some places, high population growth together with

migration to urban centres has resulted in a growing urban poor who are particularly vulnerable because of lack of jobs.

For some island countries, the scope for dealing with food security is much better than others especially in terms of local agriculture and fisheries. In some places, where access to land is limited because of population growth new forms of agriculture may need to be encouraged. Furthermore where there is over-fishing there may need to be some form of measures put in place for sustainable fisheries for income and food.

For some of the urban population, the effect of high prices may be much harder especially on meals and diet. For some others, especially from the smaller low lying island countries, scope may be quite limited in the medium term. In the long term, evacuation may be the only option for the smaller islands countries or the small low lying islands in the bigger island countries.

- Food Qualities & Safety

Changes in food prices and fuel related increases also have ramifications on the type of food eaten. It has been stated that populations living in the Pacific island countries have some of the highest prevalence of obesity and type 2 diabetes. Then there is the problem of nutrient deficiencies, where anaemia is said to be prevalent in both children and pregnant women.²

Ensuring the safety of food particularly imported food has been now and then of concern in the Pacific island countries. Controlling the safety of imported food is an enormous challenge for the small island countries not least of all here in Solomon Islands. Indeed, a lot of products have been imported from Peoples Republic of China: one wonders about the safety of these.

A World Health Organization report in 2001 found strong links between the dependence on imported food and diet related disease. The implications of high food prices are that sometimes people have limited choice and are forced to purchases cheaper junk foods, like noodles.

² Information accessed from a report produced by FAO/WHO/UNICEF/WHO/PIFS 'A Pacific Food Summit 2010; Facilitating Action for a Food Secure Pacific' 12 May 2009, pp2-3 and accessed from www.foodsecurepacific.org on 17th August 2011.

In Tonga, healthier and low-fat and traditional sources of proteins such as fish cost between 15 - 50% less than mutton flaps or imported chicken parts which are imported from New Zealand. One third of New Zealand's meat exports into the Pacific are mutton flaps - a fatty waste product. The WHO report found:

"Not only are the health consequences of these imported foods detrimental, but the availability of these cheap imports is also constraining the development of domestic markets... It appears that the solution to diet-related non-communicable diseases in Tonga cannot be based solely on nutritional education. Both the problem and the solution appear to involve economics".

When Fiji placed a ban on mutton flaps due to their proven link with obesity, New Zealand threatened to retaliate at the World Trade Organisation (as Fiji is a member of the WTO) but backed off from doing so. Some commentators speculate this was because they did not want to be seen as hypocrites in funding health education programmes in Pacific Island nations (through NZAID, the government aid program) while dumping unhealthy food products on Pacific Island nations such as Tonga?³

Intervention Questions

Is food security an area that the Anglican Alliance members could intervene in conjunction with development partners especially in the Pacific region?

What experience can be obtained from other regions and other Pacific island countries to shape the intervention of the Anglican Alliance.?

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³ Information including the WHO report accessed from a report by Jane Kesley, "Who Wants Mutton Flaps?", in *A People's Guide to PACER*, Pacific Network on Globalisation, August 2004, p. 18.